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Global Spencerism: The Communication and Appropriation of a British Evolutionist

Bernard Lightman, editor
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It may be hard to believe, but interest in the philosophy of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was once a genuine global phenomenon. In his lifetime, Spencer was a world-famous figure and, accordingly, left an important mark on the philosophical, sociological, and political culture of many countries.

Edited by distinguished historian Bernard Lightman, *Global Spencerism* brings that history of “Spencerism” back to life, collecting essays that aim to prove Herbert Spencer’s relevance well beyond the boundaries of Victorian England. The book is necessarily pedagogic, as its primary purpose is to chart the travels of Spencer’s thought and works.

Chapters are filled with bibliographical references so that the reader can easily figure out what works of Spencer were available in Russia, China, Japan, Egypt, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Italy, France, and the Scandinavian countries. Translating Spencer was always difficult, but that is not the only regularity about Spencerism we can spot in different countries. As Dawson and Radick point out in their afterword, “in studies of Darwin’s reception one usually finds stories that begin with opposing parties for and against, but that end in some form of accommodation.” In the case of Spencer, however, all stories end in his irrelevance, most of them after a roller coaster—waves of appreciation followed by waves of rather calumnious judgments. Nonetheless, all these stories have more in common than the ultimate oblivion of their subject matter. In particular, they tend to reflect how enthusiasm for Spencer sprang at the crossroads of positivism, evolution, and liberty. The commitment to a scientific education, the appreciation of the division of labor, the debunking of the rhetoric of colonialism: what today seems idiosyncratic to many, perfectly fit not only into Spencer’s thought, but also into the ideas of his contemporaries.

The contributors are far more concerned with positivism and evolution than they are with liberty. And yet by reading them one can clearly sense how these three subjects were really intertwined, so much so that, in the case of Japan for example, translating and

“appropriating” Spencer was basically conceived as a shortcut to import the values of the Enlightenment.

Spencerism’s fortunes often depended on the spread of a more diffused, and indeed more popular, scientific culture. Lower transaction costs in communication and print worked with the zeitgeist to make popular education possible.

Most of the contributions to the book try to make the reader acquainted with unfamiliar cultural settings and historical situations. These are interesting enough, but the best essay in the book, or at least the one that can be best appreciated by American readers, is the one Lightman himself devotes to the two American Spencerians, Edward Youmans (1821–87) and John Fiske (1842–1901). Lightman focuses on their “different, but complementary, approaches to discipleship.” Fiske was a popularizer, “the productive writer and lecturer who tried to help Spencer complete his philosophical system.” Youmans, however, “was primarily the organizer, working behind the scenes as Spencer’s American agent.” It took editorial genius and entrepreneurial alertness to “sell” evolution to the public, and Youmans had both.

But the diffusion of popular education and Spencerism was not just something American. Marwa Elshakry describes how, in 1903, writer Wilfrid Scawen Blunt introduced Herbert Spencer, who was to die in that same winter, “to an Egyptian admirer of his, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Muhammad Abduh.” Abduh was a religious reformer and one of the founders of the Islamic Modernism movement (as well as a student of Islamist reformer Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, a modernist-oriented Salafist). That the Grand Mufti of Egypt wanted to meet with the author of *Man versus the State* is something that may shock us.

Yet the reception of Spencer in Egypt, which Elshakry documents, was remarkable indeed. It took place in the scientific periodical *al-Muqtataf*, which aggressively promoted “Evolutionism.” “Spencer’s appeal seemed to rest precisely upon this promise of progress. In a colonial context, where the notions of progress and development were often thought to be synonymous with social uplift, political freedom or national independence, it also carried the hope of a participation in a vastly different future, geopolitical order.” But, Elshakry writes, it was the fact that Spencer’s anti-imperialism was wed with a gradualist appreciation of evolution that made his thought

attractive to “readers of many science and literary Arabic journals of the time.”

In Japan too, as G. Clinton Godart explains, Spencer met with an incipient demand:

The Freedom and Popular Rights Movement was a diverse movement of ex-samurai and others who, for a variety of reasons, appealed to the government for the establishment of popular political representation. “Freedom” (*jiyū*) became one of the neologism buzzwords of the day. These political activists found in Spencer (and others, like J.S. Mill) a scientific spokesman for their cause, and they translated accordingly.

Itagaki Taisuke, the leader of the movement, called Spencer’s *Social Statics* the “textbook of social rights.” The chapter of *Social Statics* on the rights of women, subsequently reprinted also as a stand-alone text, “was one of the first texts to appear on women’s rights in Japan.” It was used to call for “the reform of marriage and . . . to end mistreatment of women.”

Sure enough, in Japan the Spencer “boom” was followed by a Spencer “bust,” marked also by resurgent support for nationalism and high military spending. But isn’t that the usual problem with Spencer? His eclipse in the social sciences is often explained by the fact that, in the ever-growing academic specialization of the 20th century, a thinker who wrote on psychology, biology, sociology, and philosophy could not resonate with the most influential readers. But Spencer’s ideas were part of the problem too, so to speak. A staunch proponent of limited government and peace, he couldn’t be taken seriously in the era of total government and total war.

In her remarkable essay on the Italian reception of Spencer, Paola Govoni rightly stresses “the importance of individual liberty in Herbert Spencer’s thought that periodically attract[s] the attention of Italian readers.” It thus comes as a surprise that Govoni’s own treatment of Spencer’s belief in individual liberty is somewhat limited. Govoni mentions Tullio Martello, an economist that she correctly identifies as “a follower of Adam Smith” (but Martello was also a disciple of Francesco Ferrara, the doyen of Italian classical liberal economists), and refers *en passant* to Vilfredo Pareto, for whom, as Pareto said, “Spencer’s positivism is simply a metaphysics.”

Pareto's appreciation of Spencer evolved with time: the author of *Social Statics* was certainly of paramount importance, in his own formation. Maffeo Pantaleoni, another giant of the times, made frequent references to Spencer too.

Govoni's chapter, like the others in this collection, is highly informative, well written, and full of curiosities. But, though they shed light on Spencer's reception in different cultures, they do not focus on the history of classical liberalism in the countries they examine. So questions remain: How much did late 19th century and early 20th century liberalism owe to Spencer, not just in the Anglo-Saxon world? Why was he subsequently forgotten by classical liberals themselves? Is there any other explanation than to avoid being tainted by charges of "Social Darwinism"? These are interesting questions that this otherwise excellent book does not tackle. Let us hope others may attempt to answer them.

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